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RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE
RUEHGG/UN SECURITY COUNCIL COLLECTIVE
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 0710
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 4247
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 7801
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 5361
RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 1225
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 1149
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RANGOON 001118

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DEPT FOR EAP/MLS, DRL, AND IO
PACOM FOR FPA

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [BM](#)
SUBJECT: BUILDING CIVIL SOCIETY IN BURMA

REF: A. RANGOON 1055
[1](#)B. RANGOON 1056
[1](#)C. RANGOON 1105

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Classified By: Political Officer Chelsia Wheeler for Reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY. Since 2005 Embassy Rangoon has funded 23 Burmese groups and NGOs to conduct grassroots civil society and capacity building projects throughout the country. To date, we have provided a total of USD 232,536 to these groups to support capacity building, vocational and educational training, libraries, environmental projects, publications, and performances. The program has benefited thousands of Burmese who otherwise would not have access to funds and training. Through these small grants we are building the capacity of Burmese to take more control over their future. They work below the radar to strengthen democracy, meet social needs, and enhance rule of law in Burma. Many grantees will become the leaders a democratic Burma will need. END SUMMARY.

Training and Capacity Building

[1](#)2. (C) Five Embassy-funded groups offered training to ethnic minority populations to help them earn a living and to understand their rights as citizens. The Hsai Pen Media Group focused on providing Shan people with community organization skills through presentations and workshops on debate. Participants represent civil society groups, the Shan National League for Democracy (SNLD), and several cease-fire groups in Shan State. Gateway to Universal Free Speech (GUFS), a Rakhine-led group, organized three-month courses in English on human rights and democracy with the goal that participants will pass their new skills to others. A range of ethnic minorities, including Chin, Kachin, Kayah, Karen, Mon, Rakhine, and Shan, have been invited to GUFS workshops held in Rangoon. YMCA Kutkai held vocational and educational training programs in a former opium poppy-growing region in northern Shan State. A site visit from Embassy staff, however, revealed that while YMCA Kutkai used most of

the grant correctly, some sums went to unauthorized uses, which the group later reimbursed to the Embassy.

13. (C) Two of the ethnic-targeted programs focused on vocational training for women. The Tedim Baptist Convention located in Tedim, Chin State used a small grant to buy ten sewing machines and train local women, who previously had no income source, to sew clothing. Surveys of the participants reflected a positive and empowering experience with the project. One participant said, "When I return to my village, I will organize my church to buy a new sewing machine so that I can train the young people. This will be a turning point for the whole village." The Karen Women's Action Group (KWAG) to date has trained 34 young women in healthcare issues, and is preparing a second session of the two-month course. These women are often the only healthcare workers in their villages, which may be located a full day ride by bullock-cart from the nearest hospital or medical professional.

14. (C) Several of our grantees have conducted training targeted at the general population. The Knowledge Knights Group started a training center in Rangoon aimed at capacity building in the business community. The group has been successful despite significant delays in getting a DSL connection for their office due to GOB internet bureaucracy. The Cosmopolitan Reading Club (ref c), located in Bago northeast of Rangoon, conducted English language training for young adults to give them access to world literature and media sources that are not available in Burmese. Phaung Daw Oo Monastery's teacher training project focused on developing critical thinking and active discussion skills. On a recent visit to Mandalay, we met one of the participants who said that the training made her think harder than she ever had to before, but that she came away with many valuable skills. She is now a teacher in the monastery.

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Libraries and Schools

15. (C) We have also helped Diakonia Myanmar, YMCA Mandalay, ICE Youth and the KBZ Youth Library and Reading Club to create small but well-equipped libraries. Diakonia, located in northern Chin State, houses a small collection of books in its library and plans to conduct classes in media interpretation, library management, English and computer training. Similarly, YMCA Mandalay used our grant to provide a library to the local community and hold daily English language and computer classes in a newly constructed annex to its main facility. ICE Youth has set up a library for local youth located in Rangoon and conducts outreach workshops on library management in Mandalay and Kyaukpadaung. Its workshops pass along library management skills the organizers learned at Embassy-sponsored training in Rangoon. The KBZ Youth Library and Reading Club's Mobile Libraries project supports 28 small libraries throughout Shan and Kayah States, serving villages that have little or no access to outside media and literature. Like ICE Youth, it conducts librarian training courses based on lessons learned at Embassy workshops.

16. (C) Parents and teachers at the Middle School of Tuimui used our grant to organize themselves to gather books, furniture, and equipment for their school. The school project, located near the Indian border in northern Chin State, 12 miles from the nearest navigable road, faces numerous logistical and transportation difficulties, but the onset of the dry season should allow its successful completion.

Environmental Projects

17. (C) Four grantees have taken promoted community

environmental preservation. The Biodiversity and Nature Conservation Association (BANCA) created a mobile environmental education program targeted at students in the Irrawaddy Delta region. To date the program has reached approximately sixteen thousand students. The Metta Foundation and New Generation Library Association (NGLA) conduct projects to create and support community forests in Kachin State and Sagaing Division, respectively. Obtaining a certificate for a community forest designation in Burma means that these forests can be protected from exploitation by large, primarily Chinese, companies. Training that these two NGOs provide as part of their projects allows local villagers to manage and protect their forests more effectively. Finally, the Forest Resource Environment Development and Conservation Association (FREDA) held crab and fish aquaculture training in the mangrove forests of the Irrawaddy Delta. The training offered local villagers instruction on how to earn a living in the mangrove forests. This in turn provided an incentive for villagers to protect the environmentally fragile region.

Publishing and Performances

¶18. (C) Some grantees try to create space in which to discuss issues commonly considered taboo in Burma, either for cultural or political reasons. The Feminist Writers' Fellowship (ref b) has successfully published two editions of its magazine, "The Sound of Waves." Writers for the magazine express various viewpoints on a woman's role in society, even occasionally disagreeing with one another. Art.com is in the process of publishing compilations of Burmese poetry and art, which will be the most comprehensive collection in Burma to date. Gitameit uses the stage, performing skits and choral pieces that address social issues such as self-confidence and the stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS. Although the GOB has significantly limited the number of performances they have been able to conduct, they continue to seek out opportunities to perform.

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Unique Projects

¶19. (C) Three projects do not fall into any of the above categories. La Pyi Wun assists child victims of Burma's ethnic insurgencies through education and vocational training. After they complete their education and training, the children return to conflict areas to help their local communities. The orphanage where these children live is located just outside of Rangoon. Unfortunately, the head of the organization, 88 Generation Student leader Sandar Minn, has been imprisoned since August. However, the grant will continue with another organizer.

¶10. (C) The Moon Shade Karuna Association trains facilitators and volunteers in the care and support of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) patients. Most of its patients are former political prisoners and their families in the Rangoon area.

¶11. (C) The Global Green Group seeks to empower people at a grassroots level by providing them with knowledge about their legal rights and pro bono legal counseling. Currently authorities often take advantage of people's ignorance to engage in corruption and seize their assets. Instructors will hold clinics throughout the country in private law offices. They will also distribute a street law guide, which should prove to be an invaluable resource to local citizens.

¶12. (C) COMMENT. The Embassy's small grant program began two years ago as a venture into uncharted waters. Many said that it was impossible under the ruling regime's watchful eye to fund Burmese civil society organizations, or predicted that they would be unable to succeed in their efforts to promote

democracy and help build civil society. Results have proven otherwise. We manage these programs with great care, trying to improve skills where we identify weaknesses while avoiding inadvertent publicity that could land grantees in Burmese jails. The funds we spend on these programs, although modest by most standards, are transformational investments in the future of Burma. The people and organizations with whom we work will play key roles in building a more democratic future for their nation. We are developing the civil society that the Than Shwe regime tries to repress. Our grants not only provide funding, but build confidence among the Burmese people that they can take more control over their future. That these people can succeed despite the many obstacles confronting them just shows what they will be able to do when they have more freedom. END COMMENT.

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